

HYPER-INDIVIDUALISM, REALITY, AND PERCEPTION

NEW AGE BLESSINGS AND DISORDERS

In the late 1960s, within the “youth culture,” “alternative culture,” or “counterculture,” as it was variously called, there emerged some loosely related ideas and practices that earned the common rubric of *New Age*. The New Age approach persists to this day as an amalgam of Eastern mysticism, Western occultism, self-help psychology, and alternative health treatments and lifestyles. Much New Age thinking is not new at all, being borrowed from ancient disciplines transmitted by gurus, lamas, and shamans from India, Japan, and Tibet.

Many people pursue New Age interests by reading and practicing on their own, and occasionally attending a workshop or lecture. New Age books, tapes, artifacts, and programs constitute a billion-dollar industry. One national survey estimated that some 10 million Americans are engaged in some aspect of Eastern mysticism. Millions of others embrace the more secular “self-help” approaches. Lesser numbers submit to the totalistic regimen of some communal group or cult. As a cultural phenomenon, what is this all about?

New Age proponents have offered us many worthwhile things. Back when the good life was defined as the immobile life (the less exertion, the better), some New Age health enthusiasts were doing yoga and aerobics. While soft-drink companies pushed their sugar ridden, bone rotting products, and the meat and dairy industries convinced us that large daily servings of beef and milk were vital to our health, alternative health nutritionists were promoting the benefits of a sugar free, low fat, vegetarian intake. Many New Agers have taken a holistic approach to health with greater consideration given to nutritional science, preventive medicine, acupuncture, naturopathy, homeopathy, herbal treatments, and other non-

allopathic alternatives. Some New Agers incorporate meditation and other mental disciplines into their daily regimen in attempts to lower stress levels, improve their health, and find greater peace of mind.

New Agers have urged us to live less wastefully and closer to nature. While corporate agribusiness has thought nothing of drenching soil and crops with toxic herbicides and pesticides, injecting livestock with heavy doses of antibiotics and hormones, and producing genetically modified “Frankenfoods,” alternative lifestyle proponents have opted for organic farming and natural foods.

New Agers were a part of the early environmental movement. The better informed among them have argued that nature’s resources are finite, not infinite, including the earth’s capacity to absorb the heat from our energy consumption. They maintain that human beings need to discard their reliance on heavily polluting fossil fuels and turn to environmentally sustainable solar, wind, and tidal energy sources. They (along with many other people who use New Age thinking but do not consider themselves New Agers) argue that escalating levels of toxicity, global warming, ozone depletion, deforestation, top soil destruction, and defilement of oceans are damaging the health of all humankind and leading to total ecological disaster.

Appreciative of the values of Native American Indians, New Agers have challenged the Western industrial view of nature as something to be subdued and disposed of as one wishes. Some New Agers say that we are all connected to each other, to other species, and to our natural environment. For their ecological efforts they, along with other environmentalists, have been maligned as “tree huggers” and “eco-terrorists” by those conservative proponents of the corporate free market whose *raison d’être* is to transform living nature into commodities, and commodities into dead capital.

Many New Age proponents also take a critical view of militaristic and jingoistic values, and have played a prominent role in antiwar activities, reminding us, as the protest signs say, that “war is unhealthy for children and other living things.”

The New Age “approach” is a grab bag of diverse and sometimes contradictory enthusiasms and practices. Some New Agers are less dedicated to social activism than to exploring aura readings, tarot cards, palmistry, psychic readings, gemstone healing, crystal healing, astrological charting, astro-traveling, rebirthing, past-life regression, levitation, and other questionable stratagems. The claimed payoffs range from minor practicalities to miraculous cures, from being able to wake up without an alarm clock to transforming one’s entire personality.

Here I wish to examine critically the inspirationalist strain of New Age ideology that preaches hyper-individualism and limitless self-empowerment, the super subjectivist approach that downplays or even denies the existence of objective social forces.¹⁴⁰ Unlike the New Age values that tend to encourage a concern for social problems, hyper-individualism discourages worldly involvement. Instead of looking critically at the society around us and involving ourselves in social actions that might help put the world—and ourselves—on a better road, hyper-individualism invites us to plunge into self-absorption, to find a universe of empowerment entirely within ourselves. It is solipsism writ large.

For the hyper-individualist, external reality seems to count for little. What matters is how reality is *perceived*. As *est* founder Werner Erhard proclaimed, “Reality is make-believe.”¹⁴¹ Various organizations have emerged to help us develop the power “to create the reality you want, power to be in tune with higher aspects of your true nature.”¹⁴² What Jeffrey Masson says about certain psychotherapists who pay little attention to social reality would hold for many inspirationalist gurus. In their worldview, “there is no class analysis, and no poverty, inequality, hunger, or traumas such as war, rape and child abuse.”¹⁴³

The inspirationalist approach to knowledge is quite different from the scientific method that treats purely subjective experiences as unreliable. For the inspirationalist, intuition is valued over reasoning; the *more* subjective and grounded in personal feeling a perception is, the more true it must be—as with mystical revelation and other

experiences of faith. The ineffable quality of an experience is sometimes taken as evidence of its depth, and if it comes deeply from within oneself, then it must be true.

Others would argue that it is one thing to affirm our faith in the value of the individual but something else to see reality only through the prism of self. Once we treat interior experience as all-important, it is but a short step to claiming a personalized omnipotence. For some New Agers everyone is supposedly the author of his or her own fate: “You make your own reality,” “You choose your own fate.” One’s life chances are just a matter of how one decides to think and act. Social reality becomes little more than a matter of mind-set and self-will.

Such notions easily serve as grist for the rightwing ideological mill and can be carried to chilling extremes. Eileen Marie Gardner, special assistant in the U.S. Department of Education during the Reagan Administration, maintained that even the handicapped and disabled make their own destiny:

They falsely assume that the lottery of life has penalized them at random. This is not so. Nothing comes to an individual that he has not, at some point in his development, summoned. Each of us is responsible for his life situation. . . . There is no injustice in the universe. As unfair as it may seem, *a person’s external circumstances do fit his level of inner spiritual development* Those of the handicapped constituency who seek to have others bear their burdens and eliminate their challenges are seeking to avoid the central issues of their lives. [14444](#) [italics added]

These “central issues” include Down syndrome, multiple sclerosis, paralysis, spina bifida, and other incapacitating afflictions.

Gardner’s obscurantist notions bear a strong resemblance to the yogic view that congenital disabilities are deserved, for they reflect the karmic development of one’s soul. In other words, if you were born with cystic fibrosis, it is a punishment for the sins of past lives.

The same holds for one’s class condition. As a disillusioned Hindu devotee puts it: “Our spiritual leader taught us that if you are born a

poor peasant in a Third World country, destined to live out your life in hopeless poverty, it is because you acted badly in past lives. Conversely, if you are born to wealth or accumulate it, it is because you have earned this good fortune through previous good actions. It is yours to enjoy guilt-free.” [145](#)

In sum, the more hyper-subjectivist New Age devotees hold to the following maxims:

Individual will is all-powerful and determines one’s fate.

Those who are poor and hungry, or who have been raped or murdered, must have willed it upon themselves in some way.

Suffering is merely the result of imperfect consciousness.

Those who live well amidst so much deprivation have a higher consciousness, and are therefore deserving of their bounty.

Whatever one thinks to be true is true, for truth is identical to belief. [146](#)

If “there is no injustice in the universe,” as a well-fed prosperous conservative like Gardner claims, then certainly there is no injustice in our society. If you create your own reality, then you have no one to blame but yourself—or your past selves. Gender, class, and racial oppressions are all of one’s own devising or one’s just desserts. No ruling plutocrat could have said it better.

To be sure, there is nothing wrong with cultivating a capacity for inner calm and contentment. We all have an intra-psychic environment that sometimes needs tending. One’s peace of mind can be helped by meditation, exercise, good diet, and liberation from false values. Such things can make a discernible difference in one’s life. This is the alternative culture’s best contribution, influencing even many of those who would not think of themselves as New Agers.

But personal amelioration and self-centered preoccupation should not be seen as encompassing the totality of life or even the totality of individual experience. There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in the New Age philosophy.

THE MYTH OF INDIVIDUALITY

In some respects New Age self-centeredness resembles the hyper-individualism of the free-market society in which it flourishes. Under capitalism, individuated self-reliance is glorified—often by corporate interests that themselves depend on the government for multibillion dollar subsidies and supports. The myth of rugged individualism features people who pursue their personal gratification free from the needs of others, almost apart from any larger social context. [147](#)

The movies and television dramas produced by the corporate media regularly portray fearless protagonists who single-handedly vanquish evil forces and set things aright, usually with generous applications of violence: individualized culture heroes for an individualized culture. That the human condition has been advanced mostly by the organized collective efforts of many ordinary people who struggle valiantly against privilege and injustice is a radical theme largely untouched by the entertainment mass media. In a world created by the corporate system, society becomes an amalgam of self-interested beings devoted to work and consumption, engaged in market exchanges that reduce most social relations (outside the family) to instrumental values. One cultivates friendships that might prove advantageous to one's interests, interacting with others in order to get something from them. The free-market goal is individuated career advancement and acquisitive gain. The New Age goal is individuated spiritual advancement and personalized emotional gain. In their focus on the atomized self-serving individual, the yuppie and the yogi are not that far apart.

For some hyper-individualists, there is no need to get involved in worldly affairs, first, because such pursuits are a distraction from one's inner journey, and second, because improvement of the self

presumably leads to improvement of the world. As the yogi Swami Sivananda advises: "Reform yourself. Society will reform itself. Get worldliness out of your heart. The world will take care of itself. Remove the world out of your mind. The world will be peaceful."

If the world's problems begin with the individual, then it follows that "you cannot hope to improve the world until you first set yourself aright." Once that is accomplished, lo and behold, you will find nothing wrong with the world. A brochure for a New Age workshop in Vermont some years ago entitled "A Course in Miracles," tells us that "love" is what "happens when we stop trying to change the world, and change our minds instead about how we see it. . . . We are not victims of the world."

If there are no victims, there are no victimizers. Hence, we are all equally responsible for the world's ills, both the powerful and the powerless, the oppressor and the oppressed, the rapist and the raped, the child abuser and the abused child, the exploiter and the exploited, the warmonger and the war victim, the polluter and the sickened, the greedy few and the needy many.

A calm mind is essential for spiritual development, we are told. People involved in political struggles tend not to remain calm about the world's injustices; they feel frustrated and angry from time to time, and this makes them no better than the people they condemn, say the proponents of inner peace. In April 2003, a caller on a KPFA-Pacific talk show castigated peace demonstrators for venting their spleen against President G. W. Bush, who at that time was conducting a war of aggression that was killing thousands of innocents in Iraq. In the caller's opinion, those who "send out these negative feelings toward Bush are no better" than the president and his cohorts. Because they have anger in their hearts, those who oppose the killing are as bad as those who do the killing.

Without denying the desirability of self-improvement, we might ask: Must I reform my interior being, then reform the world around me? Do the me-first devotees ever feel sufficiently enlightened and self-empowered to do battle with the injustices of the larger world? An

ideology that says only the self, not the world, needs fixing is not likely to produce dedicated reformers.

How do we empower ourselves without confronting the social conditions that disempower us? Those who are preoccupied with a purely personal agenda eventually may move into the social realm, but it is usually in pursuit of the same agenda. As one personal growth practitioner noted, “People have taken *est*, and now they want a business plan.” They now seek classes in prosperity training and creative financing techniques. They become careerists within the system, not crusaders against it.

Some of them discover that material necessities count for more than they expected. One self-described “San Francisco hippie” who once believed she “could help bring about a spiritual revolution” ran into economic hard times and concluded, “It’s hard to think much about your spiritual life when you’re struggling to pay the mortgage and when your only prayer is that your teenager is practicing safe sex.”¹⁴⁸

No wonder the New Age nexus is largely a class-bound indulgence. One study finds that most cult followers are college educated Caucasians from upper- or middle-class homes.¹⁴⁹ Drastically underrepresented are farm laborers, factory workers, underpaid service employees, and others who have a crying economic need for empowerment and protection that has little to do with the rarefied refinements of self-absorbed consciousness.

The sociologist Charles Horton Cooley once said that a separate individual is an abstraction unknown to experience, and there are Buddhist practitioners who meditate upon this very phenomenon, contemplating the connectedness of the entire world, with all things coming into existence because of each other. Not so the hyper-individualists who place great value on a self-contained personage. To need others is viewed as a sign of insufficiency, rather than a normal desire of social beings—which is what humans are. To be in need of no one is supposedly to be more developed and liberated.¹⁵⁰ Thus are the unfortunate necessities of modern-day

alienation and social isolation transformed into virtuous accomplishments.

What we call the “self” and “inner consciousness” are not finished entities; rather they are intimately linked to broader social experience. The self-empowered, hyper-individualist is a myth. No human accomplishment is an autonomous thing. The athletes, artists, business leaders, scientists, and other achievers all operate within a social context; all draw upon their culture, depending on the accumulated skills, labor, inventiveness, and material resources of those who preceded them and those who currently work with or for them. No person accomplishes much without the benefit of a whole range of past and present collective assets. Even the otherworldly guru is dependent on others who feed and shelter him while he ventures into rarefied realms.

Every commodity and comfort we have, Peter Marin reminds us, is the result of “the shared labor of others; the language we use and the beliefs we hold and the ways we experience ourselves. Each of these involves a world of others into which we are entered every moment of our lives.” Even the simple act of taking coffee and sugar in the morning immerses us in the larger world. Both the sugar and coffee have been harvested most probably in a country where the land has been taken away from the small farmers who were its rightful owners, “where the wages paid those who work it are exploitively low. No doubt, too, the political system underlying the distribution of land is maintained in large part by the policies enacted and the armies acting in our name.” So even a simple commodity like coffee “has nothing to do with individual will and everything to do with economics and history.”[151](#)

Socio-economic grievances and personal maladies and unhappiness can cause some people to embrace specious solutions, gravitating toward hokey healers, sham shamans, and other cult leaders. Real self-empowerment, however, should combine personal awakening with a concern for the social and political forces that act upon us. We need to develop ways of integrating nature, society, and self to show

that greed and self-enrichment for the few should not be—and really cannot be—the way to a happy and sustainable society for all, no matter how many free-market invisible hands are at work. Blending private and public concerns is the best method of ridding ourselves of poverty, including the poverty of compassion and personal feeling that plagues too many of our citizens.

One thing seems sure: while New Age values can often make worthwhile contributions, the self-absorbed political quietism of hyper-individualism does not bring us toward any real social liberation nor, for that matter, any real *personal* liberation. If anything it plays into the hands of those authorities who prefer to govern an atomized, self-distracted, and politically illiterate constituency.

OBJECTIVITY AND THE DOMINANT PARADIGM

The important legitimating symbols of our culture are mediated through a social structure that is largely controlled by centralized, moneyed organizations. This is especially true of our information universe whose mass market is pretty much monopolized by corporate-owned media.

The reporters and news editors who work for these giant, multi-billion-dollar media conglomerates believe they are objective in their treatment of the news. If pressed on the matter, they say they are professionals who stick to the facts; they avoid injecting their personal views into their reports; they go right to the sources to get the story with no ideological ax to grind. Fox News, a news network that proffers a harsh rightwing agenda and specializes in reactionary commentary, claims to be “the only network that is fair and balanced,” as its announcers say at just about every sign-off. So, too, with the many other conservative pundits and columnists who over-populate the corporate-owned media; most seem to believe that their enunciations represent the unadorned truth. Even when they do voice a personal opinion, they feel it is anchored in the facts. In short, they believe in their objectivity.

The usual criticism of objectivity is that it does not exist. The minute one sits down to write the opening line of a story, one is making judgment calls, selecting and omitting things. Furthermore, the very nature of perception makes it a predominantly subjective experience. We are not just passive receptors sponging up a flow of images and information. Perception involves organizing stimuli and data into comprehensive units. In a word, perception is itself an act of selective editing.

The differences and distortions that arise are due not only to perceptual bias but are anchored in the very physiology of perception. It was recently reported that some people, blind since birth, had their eyesight restored through new surgical procedures. One of the unexpected results was that, even though the physiological mechanisms of sight were reconstructed, the patients still could not see much. They could divine vague shapes and shades, but could not distinguish specific objects and images. Researchers concluded that we see not just with our eyes but with our brains, and the brains of these sightless persons had not developed the capacity to organize visual perception.

Also working against the facile professions of objectivity is the understanding that we all have our own way of looking at things. We all resemble each other in some basic ways but no two persons are exactly alike. Therefore some portion of our perceptual experience is formed idiosyncratically, situated exclusively in ourselves.

But this should not be overstated. Even in this age of hyper-individualism, perception is not entirely, or even mostly, idiosyncratic. The mental selectors and filters we use to organize our informational intake are usually *not* of our own creation. Most of our seemingly personal perceptions are shaped by a variety of things outside ourselves, such as the prevailing culture, the dominant ideology, ethical beliefs, social values and biases, available information, one's position in the social structure, and one's material interests. Regarding the influence that our material interests wield on our perceptions, we might recall Upton Sinclair's remark: "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it."

Back in 1921 Walter Lippmann pointed out that much of human perception is culturally prefigured. "For the most part," wrote Lippmann, "we do not first see and then define, we define first and then see. In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture." [152](#) The notions and perceptions that fit the

prevailing climate of opinion are more likely to be accepted as objective, while those that clash with it are usually seen as beyond the pale and lacking in credibility. So, more often than we realize, we accept or decline an idea, depending on its acceptability within the dominant culture. In a fashion similar to Lippmann, Alvin Gouldner wrote about the “background assumptions” of the wider culture that are the salient factors in our perceptions. Our readiness to accept something as true, or reject it as false, rests less on its argument and evidence and more on how it aligns with the preconceived notions embedded in the dominant culture, assumptions we have internalized due to repeated exposure.¹⁵³ In our culture, among mainstream opinion makers, this unanimity of implicit bias is treated as “objectivity.”

Today we rarely refer to Gouldner’s background assumptions, but a current equivalent term might be the “dominant paradigm.” Some people even sport bumper stickers on their vehicles that urge us to “Subvert the Dominant Paradigm.” A paradigm is a basic scientific theoretical framework from which key hypotheses can be derived and tested.¹⁵⁴ In popular parlance, the dominant paradigm merely refers to the ongoing ideological orthodoxy that predetermines which concepts and labels have credibility and which do not. It is the educated person’s orthodoxy.

If what passes for objectivity is little more than a culturally defined self-confirming symbolic environment, and if real objectivity—whatever that might be—is unattainable, then it would seem that we are left in the grip of a subjectivism in which one paradigm is about as reliable (or unreliable) as another. We are faced with the unhappy conclusion that the search for social truth involves little more than choosing from a variety of illusory symbolic configurations. As David Hume argued over two centuries ago, the problem of what constitutes reality in our images can never be resolved since our images can only be compared with other images and never with reality itself.

Can we ever think that one subjective, imperfect opinion is better than another? Yes, as a rough rule of thumb, dissident opinions that are less reliant on the dominant paradigm are likely to be more vigorously tested and challenged. People approach the heterodox viewpoint with skepticism, assuming they ever get a chance to hear of it. Having been conditioned to the mainstream orthodoxy most of their lives, they are less inclined to place their trust automatically and unthinkingly in an unfamiliar analysis, one that does not fit their background assumptions. They even will self-censor it by tuning out. If given the choice to consider a new perspective or mobilize old arguments against it, it is remarkable how quickly people start reaching for the old arguments. All this makes dissent that much more difficult but that much more urgent.

People who never complain of the orthodoxy of their mainstream political education are the first to complain about the dogmatic “political correctness” of any challenge to it. Far from seeking a diversity of views, they defend themselves from exposure to such diversity, preferring to leave their conventional political opinions unruffled.

I once taught a mass media class at Cornell University. Midway through the course some students began to complain that they were getting only one side, one perspective. I pointed out that, in fact, the class discussions engaged a variety of perspectives and some of the readings were of the more standard fare. But the truth was, admittedly, that the predominant thrust of the class and assigned readings was substantially critical of the mainstream media and of corporate power in general. Then I asked them, “How many of you have been exposed to this perspective in your many other social science courses?” Of the forty students—mostly seniors and juniors who had taken many other courses in political science, economics, history, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and mass communications—not one hand went up (a measure of the level of ideological diversity at Cornell). Then I asked the students, “How many of you complained to your other instructors that you were getting only one side?” Again not a hand was raised, causing me to say, “So your protest is not really that you’re getting only one side

but that, for the first time, you're departing from that one side and are being exposed to another view and you don't like it." Their quest was not to investigate opinion heterodoxy but to insulate themselves from it.

Devoid of the supportive background assumptions of the dominant belief system, the deviant view just sounds too improbable and too controversial to be treated as balanced opinion or reliable information. Conventional opinions fit so comfortably into the dominant paradigm as to be seen, not as opinions, but as statements of fact, as "the nature of things." The very efficacy of opinion manipulation rests on the fact that we do not know we are being manipulated. The most insidious forms of oppression are those that so insinuate themselves into our communication universe and the recesses of our minds that we do not even realize they are acting upon us. The most powerful ideologies are not those that prevail against all challengers but those that are never challenged because, in their ubiquity, they appear as nothing more than the unadorned truth.

A heterodox view provides occasion to test the prevailing orthodoxy. It opens us to arguments and information that the keepers of the dominant paradigm have misrepresented or ignored outright. The dissident view is not just another opinion among many. Its task is to contest the ruling ideology and broaden the boundaries of debate. The function of established opinion is just the opposite, to keep the parameters of debate as narrow as possible.

After all is said and done, we are not doomed to an aimless relativism. Even if the problem of perception remains epistemologically unresolved, common sense and everyday life oblige us to make judgments and act as if some images and information are more reliable than others. We may not always know what is true, but we can develop some proficiency at questioning what is false. At least for some purposes, rational mechanisms have their use in the detection of error, so that even if "naked reality" constantly eludes us, we hopefully can arrive at a closer

approximation of the truth.¹⁵⁵ Misrepresentations can sometimes be exposed by a process of feedback, as when subsequent events fail to fulfill the original image, for example, as in 2004 when Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction failed to materialize as justification for war against that country.

Sometimes the orthodox view is so entrenched that evidence becomes irrelevant, but there are also times when officialdom and the corporate media have difficulty finessing reality. There are limits to the manipulative efficacy of propaganda. In 2003 official propaganda promised us a quick and easy "liberation" of Iraq, but reality brought undeniably different results that challenged the official line. White House propaganda told us that U.S. troops were "gratefully received by the Iraqi people," but the course of events produced a costly and protracted war of resistance. Propaganda told us that "a fanatical handful of terrorists and Baathist holdouts" were causing most of the trouble, but how could a handful pin down two Marine divisions and the 82nd Airborne, and inflict thousands of casualties?

As with Iraq, so with Vietnam. For years, the press transmitted the official view of the Vietnam War, but while it could gloss over what was happening in Indochina, it could not totally ignore the awful actuality of the war itself. Still the dominant paradigm prevailed. For the debate on the war was limited between those who said we could win and those who said we could not. Those of us who said we should not be there no matter what the results, that we had no right to intervene and that U.S. intervention was not in the interests of the Indochinese people nor the American people, never got a platform in the mainstream media because we were deemed ideological and not objective.

The dominant paradigm often can suppress and ignore the entire actuality as with the U.S. bombing of Cambodia during the Vietnam era, a mass slaughter that the White House kept from the public and from the Congress for quite some time. However, total suppression is not always possible, not even in a totalitarian state, as Hitler's minister of propaganda Dr. Joseph Goebbels discovered toward the

end of World War II. Goebbels unsuccessfully tried to convince the German public that Nazi armies were winning victory after victory. But after awhile the people could not help noticing that the Nazis were losing the war, for the “victorious” battles were taking place in regions that kept getting increasingly closer to Germany’s borders, finally penetrating the country itself.

Along with the limits of reality we have our powers of critical deduction. I believe it was the philosopher Morris Raphael Cohen who once said that thought is the morality of action, and logic is the morality of thought. One component of logic is consistency. Without doing any empirical investigation of our own, we can look at the internal evidence to find that, like any liar, the press and the officialdom it serves are filled with inconsistencies and contradictions.¹⁵⁶ Seldom held accountable by the news media for what they say, policymakers can blithely produce information and opinions that inadvertently reveal the falsity of previous statements, without a word of explanation. We can point to the absence of supporting evidence and the failure to amplify. We can ask, why are the assertions that appear again and again in the news not measured against observable actualities? We already know the answer to that one: it is because they fit so comfortably into the dominant paradigm. We can question why certain important events and information are summarily ignored. Again the answer is that they do not fit comfortably into the dominant paradigm. We can thereby become more aware of how officialdom and others are inviting us to believe one thing or another without establishing any reason for the belief.

There remains one hopeful thought: socialization into the conventional culture does not operate with perfect effect. If this were not so, if we were all thoroughly immersed in the dominant paradigm, then I could not have been able to record these critical thoughts and you could not have understood them.

Just about all societies of any size and complexity have their dissenters and critics or at least their quiet skeptics and

nonbelievers. No society, not even the “primitive,” is as neatly packaged as some outside observers would have us believe. Even among the Trobrianders, the Zuni, the Kwakiutl, and other “primitive” peoples, there are hearty skeptics who think the myths of their culture are just that—myths, fabricated and unconvincing stories. Culture works its effects upon us imperfectly, and often that is for the best.

In our own society, reality is more a problem for the ruling class than for the rest of us. It has to be constantly finessed and misrepresented to cloak a reactionary agenda. Those at the top understand that the corporate political culture is not a mystically self-sustaining system. They know they must work tirelessly to propagate the ruling orthodoxy, to use democratic appearances to cloak plutocratic policies.[157](#)

So there is an element of struggle and indeterminacy in all our social institutions. At least, sometimes, there is a limit to how many misrepresentations people will swallow. In the face of all monopolistic ideological manipulation, many individuals develop a skepticism or outright disaffection based on the growing disparity between social actuality and official ideology. Hence, along with institutional stability we have popular ferment. Along with elite manipulation we have widespread skepticism. Along with ruling-class coercion we have mass resistance—albeit not as much as some of us would wish.

Years ago, William James observed how custom can operate as a sedative while novelty (including dissidence) is rejected as an irritant.[158](#) Yet I would argue that after awhile sedatives can become suffocating and irritants can enliven. People sometimes hunger for the discomforting critical perspective that gives them a more meaningful explanation of things. By being aware of this, we have a better chance of moving against the tide. It is not a matter of becoming the faithful instrument of any particular persuasion but of resisting the misrepresentations of a subtle but thoroughly ideological corporate dominated culture. In the sociopolitical

struggles of this world, culture is a key battleground. The ideological gatekeepers know this—and so should the rest of us.